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IN BEHALF OF PARENTS.

BY AGNES REPPLIER.

IT IS a thankless task to be a parent in these exacting days, and I wonder now and then at the temerity which prompts man or woman to assume such hazardous duties. Time was, indeed, when parents lifted their heads loftily in the world; when they were held to be, in the main, useful and responsible persons; when their authority, if unheeded, was at least unquestioned; and when one of the ten commandments was considered to indicate that especial reverence was their due. These simple and primitive convictions lingered on so long that some of us can perhaps remember when they were a part of our youthful creed, and when, in life and in literature, the lesson commonly taught was that the province of the parent is to direct and control, the privilege of the child is to obey, and to be exempt from the painful sense of responsibility which overtakes him in later years. In very old-fashioned books this point of view is strained to embrace some rather difficult conclusions. The attitude of Evelina to her worthless father, of Clarissa Harlowe to her tyrannical parents, seemed right and reasonable to the generations which first read these novels, while we of the present day are amazed at such unnatural submissiveness and loyalty. "It is hard," says Clarissa's mother, in answer to her daughter's despairing appeals, "if a father and mother, and uncles and aunts, all conjoined, cannot be allowed to direct your choice;" an argument to which the unhappy victim replies only with her tears. How one longs to offer Mrs. Harlowe some of those little manuals of advice which prove to us now so conclusively that even a young child is deeply wronged by subjection. "Looked at from the highest standpoint," says one of our modern mentors, "we have no more right to interfere with individual choice in our children

than we have to interfere with the choice of friends ;” a statement which, applied as it is, not to marriageable young women, but to small boys and girls, defines matters explicitly, and does away at once and forever with all superannuated theories of obedience.

A short perusal of these text-books of training would lead the uninitiated to conclude that the children of to-day are a down-trodden race, deprived of their natural rights by the ruthless despotism of parents. It is also indicated with painful and humiliating distinctness that adults have no rights—at least none that children are bound to respect—and that we have hardened ourselves into selfishness by looking at things from a grown-up, and consequently erroneous, point of view. For example, to many of us it is an annoyance when a child wantonly destroys our property. This is ungenerous. “With anointed eyes we might often see in such a tendency a great power of analysis, that needs only to be understood to secure grand results ;”—which reflection should make us prompt to welcome the somewhat disastrous results already secured. I once knew a little boy who, having been taken on a visit to some relatives, succeeded within half-an-hour in purloining the pendulums of three old family clocks, a passion for analysis which ought to have made him one of the first mechanics of his age, had not his genius, like that of the political agitator, stopped short at the portals of reconstruction.

It is hard to attune our minds to a correct appreciation of such incidents, when the clocks belong to us, and the child doesn’t. It is hard to be told that our pendulums are a necessary element, which we do wrong to begrudge, in the training of a boy’s observation. All modern writers upon children unite in denouncing the word “don’t,” as implying upon every occasion a censure which is often unmerited. But this protest reminds me of the little girl who, being told by her father she must not say “I won’t,” innocently inquired : “But, papa, what am I to say when I mean ‘I won’t’” ? In the same spirit of uncertainty I would like to know what I am to say when I mean “don’t.” Aurette Roys Aldrich, who has written a book on *Children—Their Models and Critics*, in which she is rather severe upon adults, tells us a harrowing tale of a mother and a five-year-old boy, who sat near her one day on a railway train. The child thrust his head out of the window, whereupon the mother

said tersely : " Johnnie, stop putting your head out of the window ! " That was all. No word of explanation or entreaty softened this ruthless command. Whether Johnnie obeyed or not is unrevealed, being a matter of no importance, but, " as they left the car," comments the author, " they left also an aching in my heart. I longed to clasp the mother in my arms, for she, too, had been the victim of misunderstanding, and show her, before it was too late, how she was missing the pure gold of life for herself and her little boy." Happily, before long, another mother entered, and her child also put his head as far as he could out of that troublesome window, which nobody seemed to have the sense to shut. Observing this, his wise parent sat down by his side, " made some pleasant remark about the outlook," and then gradually and persuasively revealed to him his danger, discussing the matter with " much candor and interest," until he was finally won over to her point of view, and consented of his own free will, and as a rational human being, to draw in his little head.

I think this double experience worth repeating, because it contrasts so pleasantly with the venerable anecdote which found its way into all the reading books when I was a small child, and illustrated the then popular theory of education. It was the story of a mother who sees her boy running rapidly down a steep hill, and knows that, almost at his feet, lies an abandoned quarry, half hidden by underbrush and weeds. Sure of his obedience, she calls sharply, " Stop, Willie ! " and the child, with a violent effort, stays his steps at the very mouth of the pit. Had it been necessary to convince him first that her apprehensions were well-grounded, he would have broken his neck meanwhile, and our school books would have had one tale less to tell.

Still more astounding to the uninitiated is another little narrative told with enviable gravity by Mrs. Aldrich, and designed to show how easily and deeply we wound a child's inborn sense of justice. " A beautiful boy of four whose parents were unusually wise in dealing with him "—it is seldom that a parent wins this degree of approbation—possessed a wheel-barrow of his own, in which he carried the letters daily to and from the post-office. One morning he was tardy in returning, " for there was the world to be explored " on the way ; and his mother, growing anxious, or perhaps desiring her mail, followed him to know what was the

matter. She met him at the post-office door, and seeing in the barrow an envelope directed to herself, she rashly picked it up and opened it. Edwin promptly "raised a vehement cry of protest." That letter, like all the rest, had been given to him to carry, and no one else was privileged to touch it. Swiftly and repentantly his mother returned the unfortunate missive, but in vain. "The wound was too deep, and he continued to cry 'Mamma, you ought not to have done it!' over and over again between his sobs." In fact he "refused to be comforted,"—comforted!—"and so was taken home as best he could be, and laid tenderly and lovingly in bed. After sleeping away *the sharpness of sorrow and disappointment*, and consequent exhaustion, the matter could be talked over; but while he was so tired, and keenly smarting under the sense of injustice done him, every word added fuel to the flame. . . . *His possessions had been taken away from him by sheer force, before which he was helpless.* That his indignation was not appeased by putting the letter back into his keeping showed that he was contending for a principle, and not for possession or any selfish interest."

Readers of George Eliot may be pleasantly reminded of that scene in *The Mill on the Floss* where Tom Tulliver unthinkingly withdraws a rattle with which he has been amusing baby Moss, "whereupon she, being a baby that knew her own mind with remarkable clearness, instantaneously expressed her sentiments in a piercing yell, and was not to be appeased even by the restoration of the rattle, feeling apparently that the original wrong of having it taken away from her remained in all its force." But to some of us the anecdote of Edwin and his wheel-barrow is more disheartening than droll. The revelation of such admirable motives underlying such inexcusable behavior puzzles and alarms us. If this four-year-old prig "contending for a principle and not for possession" be a real boy, what has become of all the dear, naughty, fighting, obstinate, self-willed, precious children whom we used to know; the children who contended joyously, not for principle, but for precedence, and to whom we could say "don't" a dozen times a day with ample justification. Little boys ought to be the most delightful things in the world, with the exception of little girls. It is as easy to love them when they are bad as to tolerate them when they are good. But what can we do with conscientious infants to whom

misbehavior is a moral obligation, and who scream in the public streets from an exalted sense of justice.

Mrs. Kate Douglas Wiggin, that ardent champion of Froebel, has also given to the world a book bearing the somewhat ominous title, *Children's Rights*, but which is for the most part as interesting as it is sane. Setting aside the question of kindergartens, concerning which there are at present many conflicting opinions, it is impossible not to agree with Mrs. Wiggin in much that she states so deftly, and maintains so vivaciously. There is little doubt that the rights of the parent do infringe occasionally on the rights of the child, and that, in the absence of any standard, the child becomes a creature of circumstance. He can be fed unwholesomely, kept up late at night, dressed like Lord Fauntleroy, dosed with pernicious drugs, and humored into selfish petulance at the discretion of his mother. Worse still, he can be suffered to waste away in fever pain and die, because his parents chance to be fanatics who reject the aid of medicines to trust exclusively in prayer. But granting all this, fathers and mothers have still their places in the world, and until we can fill these places with something better, it is worth while to call attention now and then to the useful part they play. It is perhaps a significant fact that mothers, simply because they are mothers, succeed better, as a rule, in bringing up their children than other women, equally loving and sensible, who are compelled to assume their duties. That old-fashioned plea "I know what is best for my child" may be derided as a relic of darkness; but there is an illuminating background to its gloom. I am not even sure that parents stand in absolute need of all the good advice they receive. I am quite sure that many trifles are not worth the serious counsels expended upon them. Reading or telling a story, for instance, has become as grave a matter as choosing a laureate, and many a mother must stand aghast at the conflicting admonitions bestowed upon her: Read fairy tales. Don't read fairy tales. Read about elves. Don't read about ogres. Read of heroic deeds. Don't read of bloody battles. Avoid too much instruction. Be as subtly instructive as you can. Make your stories long. Make your stories short. Work the moral in. Leave the moral out. Try and please the older children. Try and charm the younger ones. Study the tastes of boys. Follow the fancies of girls. By degrees the harassed parent who endeavors to obey these instruc-

tions will cease telling stories at all, confident that the task, which once seemed so simple and easy, must lie far beyond her limited intelligence.

All that Mrs. Wiggin has to say about children's books and playthings is both opportune and true. I wish indeed she would not speak of restoring toys "to their place in education," which has a dismal sound, though she does not mean it to be taken dismally. Toys are toys to her, not traps to erudition, and the costly inanities of our modern nurseries fill her with well-warranted aversion. We are doing our best to stunt the imaginations of children by over-loading them with illustrated story-books and elaborate playthings. Little John Ruskin, whose sole earthly possessions were a cart, a ball, and two boxes of wooden bricks, was infinitely better off than the small boy of to-day whose real engine drags a train of real cars over a miniature elevated railway, almost as ghastly as reality, and whose well-dressed soldiers can't fight until they are wound up with a key. "The law was that I should find my own amusement," says Ruskin, and he found it readily enough in the untrammelled use of his observation, his intelligence, and his fancy. I have known children to whom a dozen spools had a dozen distinct individualities; soldiers, priests, nuns and prisoners of war; and to whom every chair in the nursery was a well-tried steed, familiar alike with the race-course and the Holy Land, having its own name, and requiring to be carefully stabled at night after the heroic exertions of the day. The romances and dramas of infancy need no more setting than a Chinese play, and in that limitless dreamland the transformations are as easy as they are brilliant. But no child can successfully "make believe," when he is encumbered on every side by mechanical toys so odiously complete that they leave nothing for the imagination to supply.

In the matter of books, Mrs. Wiggin displays the same admirable conservatism, her modern instincts being checked and held in sway by the recollection of those few dear old volumes which little girls used to read over and over again, until they knew them by heart. Yet I hardly think that "naughty" is a kind word to apply to Miss Edgeworth's Rosamond, who is not very wise, I admit, and under no circumstances a prig, but always docile and charming and good. And why should the "red morocco housewife," which Rosamond, in one of her rare mo-

ments of discretion, chooses instead of a stone plum, be stigmatized as "hideous but useful." It may have been an exceedingly neat and pretty possession. We are told nothing to the contrary, and I had a brown one stamped with gold when I was a little girl, which, to my infant eyes, represented supreme artistic excellence. It also hurts my feelings very much to hear Casabianca dubbed an "inspired idiot," who lacked the sense to escape. Unless the Roman sentries found dead at their posts in Pompeii were also inspired idiots, there should be some kinder word for the blind heroism which subordinates reason to obedience. And I am by no means sure that this form of relentless nineteenth-century criticism does not do more to vulgarize a child's mind by destroying his simple ideals than do the frank old games which Mrs. Wiggin considers so boorish, and which fill her with "unspeakable shrinking and moral disgust." The coarseness of "Here come two ducks a-roving," which was once the blithest of pastorals, and of that curious relic of antiquity, "Green Gravel," is not of a hurtful kind, and some of these plays have a keen attraction for highly imaginative children. For my part, I do not believe that all the kindergarten games in Christendom, all the gentle joy of pretending you were a swallow and had your little baby swallows cuddled under your wing, can compare for an instant with the lost delight of playing "London Bridge" in the dusk of a summer evening, or in the dimly-lit schoolroom at bedtime. There was a mysterious fascination in the words whose meaning no one understood, and no one sought to understand :

"Here comes a candle to light you to bed,
And here comes a hatchet to cut off your head."

And then the sudden grasp of four strong little arms, and a pleasing thrill of terror at a danger which was no danger—only a shadow and a remembrance of some dim horror in the past, living for generations in the unbroken traditions of play.

I have wandered unduly from the wrongs of parents to the rights of children, an easy and agreeable step to take. But the children have many powerful advocates, and need no help from me. The parents stand undefended, and suffer grievous things in the way of counsel and reproach. It must surprise some of them occasionally to be warned so often against undue severity. It must amaze them to hear that their lazy little boys and girls

are suffering from overwork, and in danger of mental exhaustion. It must amuse them—if they have any sense of humor—to be told in the columns of a weekly paper “How to Reprove a Child,” just as they are told “How to Make an Apple Pudding,” and “How to Remove Grease Spots from Clothing.” As for the discipline of the nursery, that has become a matter of supreme importance to all whom it does not concern, and the suggestions offered, the methods urged, are so varied and conflicting that the modern mother can be sure of one thing only—all that she does is wrong. The most popular theory appears to be that whenever a child is naughty it is his parent’s fault, and she owes him prompt atonement for his misbehavior. “We should be astonished, if not appalled,” says Mrs. Aldrich, “if we could see in figures the number of times the average child is unnecessarily censured during the first seven years of life.” Punishment is altogether out of favor. Its apparent necessity arises from the ill-judged course of the father or mother in refusing to a child control over his own actions. This doctrine was expounded to us some years ago by Helen Hunt, who reasoned wisely that “needless denials” were responsible for most youthful naughtiness, and who was probably right. It would not perhaps be too much to say that if we could have what we wanted and do what we wanted all through life, we should, even as adults, be saved from a great deal of fretfulness and bad behavior.

Miss Nora Smith, who is Mrs. Wiggin’s clever collaborateur, allows, however, what she terms “natural punishment,” or “natural retribution,” which appears to be something like the far-famed justice of the Mikado, and is represented as being absolutely satisfactory to the child. This is a gain over the old methods which the child, as a rule, disliked; and it is also a gain over the long-drawn tests so urgently commended by Helen Hunt, whose model mother shut herself up for two whole days with her four-year-old boy, until she succeeded, by moral suasion, in inducing him to say G. During these two days the model mother’s equally model husband was content to eat his meals alone, and to spend his evenings in solitude, unless he went to his club, and all her social and domestic duties were cheerfully abandoned. Her principle was not to enforce obedience, but to persuade the child to overcome his own reluctance, to conquer his own will. With this view she pretended for forty-eight hours that he could not

pronounce the letter, and that she was there to help him to do it. The boy, baby though he was, knew better. He knew he was simply obstinate, and, with the delicious clear-sightedness of children, which ought to put all sentimental theorists to shame, he actually proposed to his parent that she should shut him in a closet and see if that would not "make him good!" Of course the unhallowed suggestion was not adopted; but what a tale it tells of childish acumen, and of that humorous grasp of a situation which is the endowment of infancy. The dear little sensible, open-eyed creatures! See them dealing out swift justice to their erring dolls, and you will learn their views upon the subject of retribution. I once knew a father who defended himself for frequently thrashing an only and idolized son—who amply merited each chastisement—by saying that Jack would think him an idiot if he didn't. That father was lamentably ignorant of much that it behooves a father now to acquire. He had probably never read a single book designed for the instruction and humiliation of parents. He was in a state of barbaric darkness concerning the latest theories of education. But he knew one thing perfectly, and that one thing, says Sir Francis Doyle, is slipping fast from the minds of men; namely, "The intention of the Almighty that there should exist for a certain time between childhood and manhood, the natural production known as a boy."

AGNES REPPLIER.